

The Kurum Kuzhal of Kerala

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NAGASWARAM is a comparatively new introduction to Kerala, but from time immemorial a similar instrument of smaller size—the Kurum Kuzhal, also known simply as Kuzhal—has been used in the region. One of the *susira vādyas* of temple worship, it is almost the same as the Shehnai of the North or the Mukhaveena of Tamil Nadu or the Mouri of Karnataka. In northern Kerala the Kuzhal is sometimes called Cheeni Kuzhal.

The instrument is 12 to 18 inches long, consisting of a conical wooden pipe called *olavu* with a bell-metal—rarely wooden—attachment called *kizh anasu*. At the top end the reed, *narukku*, is fixed to a small metal attachment called *mel anasu*. In some instruments this may be wooden, part of the main wooden pipe. The reed is made by an elaborate process from a plant that grows wild in the marshes. It is fixed to a small tube, *nelli*, which is inserted into the top of the pipe to fit correctly. A circular metal or horn or mother-of-pearl disc—*kavulidikki*—is fixed at the end of the pipe though of late this is rarely seen. The disc is said to help even toothless players play properly. Spare reeds, and a horn or ivory bodkin to clear the reeds, are hung from a string connecting the top and bottom attachments. The Kurum Kuzhal has seven holes in a row above and an eighth below, right at the top, which is stopped by the left thumb of the player.

Double-reeded pipes of this type are seen all over the world. The view held by some scholars that this type of pipe originated in Egypt and spread thence to India is not tenable. The same instrument often develops independently in different lands. In Kerala children can be seen playing a *peepee*, a whistle they make themselves from coconut leaves. This toy is further developed in the Kuzhals of the Paraya Harijan community and the tribals of Attappadi, Wynaad, and other hill areas.

In the instrument normally used by the Paraya community of Trichur district the stem is a conical tube made of jungle wood, about six inches long, and an inch in diameter at the bottom. A thin brass bell—*kuzhal talam*—attached to the stem is about four inches high, with a diameter of four and a half inches at the bottom. There are five holes in the tube and a coconut-shell-disc lip guard—*kavilāti*—at the playing end. There is no top attachment but the

reed is fixed to a small metal tube—*nelli*—and fastened crudely to the top with strings. The five holes remind us of the pentatonic scale and in fact notes like *sa, ga, ma, pa, dha, sa* can be produced. The instrument is played at folk festivals and some of the social ceremonies of the Harijans, the puberty ceremony for example. It is amazing to see the way the player correctly reproduces folk songs sung on various occasions. Though only three or four notes are usually produced the instrument has a eerie, haunting effect, especially when heard at night.

Another folk instrument known as Ezhava Vadyam is seen in the Tammalapuram area of Palghat district of Kerala, where there is a good deal of Tamil influence. It is played at social ceremonies of the Ezhava community and accompanies Kavadi Attam as well. The conical tube of this instrument is about 13 inches long and the bottom diameter is about three-fourths of an inch. The bell-metal bottom attachment is called *kalam*—about four inches long, with a bottom diameter also of about four inches. The top metal attachment is called *melani* and is about two and a half inches long. There are seven playing holes and four more vent holes below. Mandara (*Bauhinia Purpurea*) is claimed to be the best wood for the instrument though palmyra is also used. The reeds used to be made of palm leaves but now only Nagaswaram reeds are used.

The Ezhava Vadyam players do not identify the *swaras* as *sa, ri, ga, ma*, etc. The student learns from observation and the demonstrations of the guru, the practice lessons being known as *charali*. After taking some 12 *charali* lessons, the student learns to play the basic pieces called *chindu*. Thavil and Elathalam are played in accompaniment. Normally half-tones are not produced. Of late the Ezhava Vadyam players have started playing film songs.

In considering the development of the Kurum Kuzhal it would be interesting to note the description of the instrument Madhukari in the *Sangita Ratnākara* of Sārangadeva (Chapter 6, verses 787–793):

A good Madhukari is 18 *angulas* long [an *angula* is a little more than an inch] and may be made of horn or wood. It is shaped like a *kahala* [conical tube]. The opening at the blowing end is the size of a *tuvar* [pulse] seed. Four inches off the mouth, seven holes are made as in a flute, and another hole is made on the lower side between the mouth and the first hole. To get a sweet sound a four-inch copper tube of the diameter of a barley seed is fixed to the mouth and on top of that a circular disc of ivory or mother-of-pearl is fixed. In the hole of the tube a reed shaped like a partially opened jasmine bud, made from *deva nala* [a reed plant], and softened by cooking in milk is fixed. The Madhukari is to be played like a flute. The hole on the lower side is to be closed by the left thumb.

The above specifications of the Madhukari are almost identical with the Kurum Kuzhal. When the hole on the lower side is stopped by the left thumb, the manner in which the instrument is held is also specified automatically. The Kurum Kuzhal is held in much the same fashion as the Madhukari described by Sārangadeva.

Traditionally, the wood used is *karungali* (*Acacia Sundra*), *khadira* in Sanskrit. Ebony and rosewood are also used. Tubes from old Nagaswarams are often used nowadays as there are scarcely any good instrument-makers left. The reed comes from a plant known as *ama*, *sara* in Sanskrit. The reeds are collected in summer, dried in the shade and kept aside for a year. Then they are steamed, cooked with meat and later in milk, dried and shaped in a press. Nowadays no one attempts to make reeds in Kerala. They get reeds from Tamil Nadu.

Traditionally a young learner goes to help his relatives who play in the temple. He first learns to keep the rhythm with the cymbals. Then he starts playing the *shruti*—*Ottu*—and learns to blow and breathe at the same time. This called *swasam marikkuka* for which a bamboo tube is used. *Saptaswaram* is first learnt vocally, then on the instrument. Teaching is conducted in the traditional Carnatic style. The student graduates later to playing *ragas* and *pattu*—a form now grown into the *pallavi*—surviving in Tamil Nadu as *rakthi melam*. The standard of a Kurum Kuzhal player is judged by the *pattu* he plays. Some *padas* and *javalis* are also learnt as there are specific occasions for playing these in temple processions. A Kurum Kuzhal player has to be well up in the art of Chenda *melam* as well: it is the Kurum Kuzhal player who actually controls the Chenda *melam*.

The holes in the Kurum Kuzhal correspond to the Harikambhoji scale. Sharper or flatter notes are rendered not only by opening the holes partially but also by pulling out or pushing in the reed in the mouth. The last hole at the bottom end is taken as the *shadja*, the solitary hole on the lower side closed by the thumb is the *nishada* and the first hole at the top end is the upper *shadja*. By closing the last hole near the bell bottom with the little finger one can produce *dhaivata*, and even *panchama* by pulling the reed out.

In the temple, Kurum Kuzhal accompanies the rites of *palli unarthal* (awakening the deity), *seva*, *deepārāadhanā* and *seeveli* (circumambulation of the temple with the idol). The following *ragas* are customarily played: Bhoopalam at dawn, Desakshi and Bilahari in the morning, Saveri, Dhanyasi and Bhairavi later in the morning, Poorvikalyani in the early evening, Kalyani, Sankarabharanam and Natta at sunset, Todi, Kambhoji, Yadukulakambhoji, Mukhari, Ananda-Bhairavi and Kanakkurunji at night.

The Kurum Kuzhal is also associated with a variety of temple festival rituals, *vilakku āchāram* for one. Here the deity is brought out of the sanctum and several instruments—Chenda, Maddalam, Kombu, Kurum Kuzhal, etc.—played solo in His ‘presence’. This is an occasion for musicians to demonstrate their talents. It is here that a Kuzhal player plays a *pattu*, accompanied by a *shruti* (drone), a Chenda and an Elathalam for rhythm. The playing begins with a few snatches of Natta *rāgam*. Then the main *rāga* is elaborated, usually Kambhoji, Kalyani, Sankarabharanam, Bhairavi, Ananda-Bhairavi, Neelambari, Mukhari, Devagandhari, etc. The *pattu* proper is played after this. The percussionists join in only at this stage and, unlike Nagaswaram accompanists, do not play during the intervals in *rāgālāpanā*. The *pattu* is first rendered in *vilamba kalam* and the tempo increased later. Usually Chempata (Adi) *tala* is used. The playing of *nadais* (Tisram, etc.) is called *kooru vāyikkuka*. The performance concludes with Suruti *rāga* in a *tala* of four *matras* and Madhyamavati in Ekatala.

Vilakku āchāram is followed by the rite of Edakka *pradakshina*. The deity is taken around the temple to the accompaniment of several instruments. In some temples importance is attached to the playing of the Kurum Kuzhal during this ceremony. *Rakthi rāgas* are rendered on the occasion together with *śringāra padams* and even *javalis*, usually in Tripura *tala* or Mīra Chapu. A song often played is ‘*Mathada bara deno*’. The use of *rakthi rāgas*, Tripura *tala*, and the rendering of *śringāra padas* during the Edakka *pradakshina* indicate that in an earlier age dancing women may have preceded the deity.

The *pradakshina* is followed by a slow procession of musicians and devotees led by temple elephants. A large group of Chenda players is the principal feature of this procession, which may take hours as it stops along the way. The Kurum Kuzhal players face the Chenda players in the procession, and the chief Kuzhal player controls the pace and *tāla* of the *melam*. By using his instrument—called Kuzhal Minnikkuka—as conductor’s baton, he regulates the tempo and shows where the *kalasams*, or *muthayippu*, are to be played. When these are rendered the Kurum Kuzhal functions as an instrument that keeps the rhythm and not melody. The *jātis* of the Chenda are rendered on Kuzhal. However, during intervals between the periodic *muthayippus*—i.e., when repetitive *jātis* are played on the Chenda—the Kuzhal does play melody. In earlier times different *ragas* were rendered on Kuzhal, depending on the *tala* used for Chenda *melam*. Unfortunately today no two Kuzhals will have the same *shruti* and the result, if played ensemble, would be a veritable

cacophony. However, when *jatis* are played on Kuzhal along with the Chenda, it does add to the overall grandeur of Chenda *melam*.

Apart from its role in temple ritual, the Kurum Kuzhal was used in Kūṭiyāṭṭam—Sanskrit plays staged in the traditional temple theatres of Kerala. Unfortunately the Kuzhal tradition in Kūṭiyāṭṭam—the proper function of the instrument in the drama—is now irretrievably lost. Most Kūṭiyāṭṭam troupes today avoid the use of the instrument.

With declining patronage for traditional temple arts, especially after the land reforms in Kerala, the income of Kurum Kuzhal players went down steeply. Kuzhal players, by and large, have gradually taken to the Nagaswaram since it is in greater demand outside the temples. This has led to utter neglect of the Kuzhal and a great deterioration in standards. As there is no demand good instruments are also not made. In many temples the Nagaswaram has replaced some of the functions of the Kurum Kuzhal.

There is a silver lining to the cloud, however. Three institutions are now training students in Kurum Kuzhal: at Mulakunnathu Kavu in Trichur district, at Guruvayoor and Vaikom. These institutions, run by Dewaswom departments, offer students stipends for their courses of study. This marks a good beginning in the revival of the Kurum Kuzhal, an instrument long associated with the culture of Kerala. □